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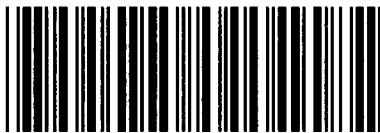
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## Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists

by Caroline Hunt

Adolescent literature has been "coming of age" for over a quarter of a century if you count from *The Pigman* and *The Outsiders*, more than half a century if you count from *Seventeenth Summer*. Beginning in 1992-93, this coming of age has been marked by quasi-official rites of passage—such as a widespread acceptance of the grown-up name "young adult"; commemorative issues of *English Journal* and *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*; and individual articles in other journals. As Richard Peck points out, young adult literature has become "a second-generation literature now for the children of our first readers" (19). Other acts of recognition range from the positive (increased speculation about whether a canon of young adult literature can, or does, exist) to the pessimistic, exemplified by Marc Aronson's "The YA Novel Is Dead and Other Fairly Stupid Tales." The field is mature in some ways—here I use the word "mature" as we might speak of a "mature economy"—but unstable or regressive in others.

As the literature has developed, so has the study of that literature. (In reviewing its history, I deal primarily with fiction because recent theory about children's literature centers on fiction.) I suggest that the study of "adolescent" literature has developed in a rather different way from that of children's literature in general, and that one result of its peculiar development has been a striking lack of theoretical criticism.

The first problem is that virtually no theoretical criticism attaches to young adult literature *as such*. Theorists in the wider field of children's literature often discuss young adult titles without distinguishing them as a separate group and without, therefore, indicating how theoretical issues in young adult literature might differ from those in literature for younger children. Important critical books of the 1980s take it for granted that young adult books and books for younger children are essentially alike. Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) does not treat young adult titles as in any way unlike those for younger children, and neither does Juliet Dusinberre's *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (1987). Zohar Shavit, in *Poetics of Children's Literature* (1986), similarly considers juvenile literature as more or less unified and does not separate works for the upper age ranges.

Moving into the 1990s, one can see theorists noting some key distinctions; still, they do not, on the whole, address young adult books separately. Sometimes they do not address them at all. The concept of the child employed in Peter Hunt's *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (1991) clearly describes a preadolescent being; Hunt cites Nicholas Tucker's list of the characteristics of children, including "spontaneous play, receptivity to the prevailing culture, physiological con-

straints (children are generally smaller and weaker), and sexual immaturity (which implies that certain concepts are not immediately relevant to them)" (57, my italics). Accordingly, most of Hunt's examples are from the mid-range of children's books—for readers past the toddler years but not yet in their teens. This schema has the merit of consistency (and *implies* a distinction between children and adolescents) but appears to exclude any systematic examination of young adult books.

John Stephens, in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), covers a broader age range, including a number of young adult texts: Jan Needle's *My Mate Shofiq*, Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*, and books by Rosemary Sutcliff, Ursula LeGuin, and Cynthia Voigt. Stephens shows his awareness of age differences in a brilliant account of ideological manipulation in picture books for younger readers; however, he pays specific attention to differences at the upper end of the age line only occasionally, as when he states that traditional values in Leon Garfield occur "in a context which renders them contingent. . . especially . . . in Garfield's novels *for older readers*" (230, my italics).

Perry Nodelman, too, lumps young adult books in with other children's books in the first edition of *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (1992); the only section to address these books specifically deals with problem novels such as those of Judy Blume (200-2), and the bibliographical appendix lists a few young adult items as a subset of "Kinds of Children's Fiction" (243-44). Like Stephens, Nodelman shows elsewhere in the book, and especially in discussing picture books, that he is well aware of differences between age groups. Unlike the previous critics, Nodelman makes explicit his belief that, for theoretical purposes, there is no need to regard young adult books as a separate category; his revised edition (1996) confronts this problem directly, while allowing for the possibility that others may differ:

Many people disagree with my contention . . . that young adult fiction is merely a subgenre of children's literature. I've been told that I ought not to have even mentioned young adult literature in a book about children's literature. As a kind of writing intended for teenagers, a group of people quite different from younger children, young adult literature [appears to some people to be] a completely different kind of writing, with its own distinctive characteristics. (191-92)

Nodelman then suggests that readers compare several young adult novels to some with "similar characters or situations but intended for younger children" (192). Though ostensibly a

textbook, *Pleasures* touches upon most of the issues that theorists are currently discussing.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum from Nodelman's approach, but agreeing about the essential unity of juvenile fiction, is a recent and controversial book by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994). Picking up where Rose left off a decade earlier, Lesnik-Oberstein challenges not only the possibility of children's fiction but also the validity of children's literature criticism. As Nodelman himself crisply summarizes the case on the electronic discussion group CHILD\_LIT,

because [she] has serious problems with the accuracy of critical representations of the child, she has serious problems with the criticism she perceives as being based upon it. And this is, according to her, all children's literature criticism—which therefore becomes a totally wrong-headed and counter-productive endeavor.

Lesnik-Oberstein's cited examples range from materials for the very young to those for what must surely be adolescent readers, although she mentions very few specific titles. Despite the strong correlation between her concept of childhood and that of children's books and their criticism, this theorist, too, moves effortlessly from the toddler to the teen with few distinctions along the way.

The only conclusion I am able to draw from examining this sample of influential critical texts, produced over the fifteen-year period from 1980 to 1995, is that not a single major theorist in the field deals with young adult literature as something separate from literature for younger children—though Stephens and Nodelman allow for differences of opinion on this separation and/or for differential treatment of specific texts.

Second, the relative youth of the young adult category compounds the problem; it takes a while for serious criticism to get started. (Consider the parallel case of science fiction, for instance.) Literature "for" children, in various senses, has been around for centuries. Many estimates start with John Newbery, two hundred years before *Seventeenth Summer*; others go back to James Janeway, or the Elizabethans, or the *Babes Boks*; and Gillian Adams pushes the date back to ancient times in "The Case for Summer." But no one, as far as I know, seriously suggests that young adult literature as a separate category begins before World War II (*Seventeenth Summer*) or, alternatively, the late 1960s (*The Outsiders*). An important corollary is that adolescence, as a prolonged period of maturation, is itself a relatively recent concept and is much more firmly entrenched in North America and Europe than elsewhere. There is no way to push the origins of the young adult novel back to Summer.

Both of the previous points are readily apparent, and both bear directly upon the relative scarcity of theory in the young adult field. Obviously, a literary subgenre that has existed for twenty-five to fifty years will accrue less commentary than an

My next five topics—marketing, censorship, the canon, young adult literature courses, and the growth of young adult literature scholarship—are less obvious. Yet these questions matter too: where the books are sold, why people involved with these books spend so much time on the defensive, what books become "classics," how the books are presented in colleges and schools, and, last, who teaches and writes about these books (and how). The answers help to explain why this branch of juvenile writing has amassed less theoretical criticism than others.

The first point of major difference between young adult and children's literature concerns how books are publicized and sold—and, more important, how they are bought. Market-ing poses a number of important issues. Children, especially younger ones, have books bought for them by parents, or perhaps select them with parents; young adults can select or even buy their own books. This power means that popularity reigns supreme, except perhaps for sales to libraries. A visit to any chain bookstore will reveal how this works. Many young adult titles are issued as original paperbacks—far more than in the children's section. Many belong to series. There may be few or no reviews, as the standard reviewing sources tend to concentrate on hardcover single titles. In addition, far fewer individual authors are represented in the young adult section than in the children's section (even allowing for the fact that the young adult section is much smaller to start with); instead, there are likely to be multiple titles by a few well-established authors. In short, the young adult books being reviewed and written about are not on the bookstore shelves, and those on the bookstore shelves are not being written about or reviewed.<sup>2</sup>

A related issue is that the very evanescence of the teenage years causes young adult books to "date" more swiftly than their counterparts for younger children. A second-grader may enjoy *Charlotte's Web* (1952) as children have enjoyed it for decades, but her older sister will get little from Mary Stolz's *The Sea Gulls Woke Me*, published the year before E. B. White's classic. In this charming tale of an awkward young girl's summer away from home, the entire romantic "action" consists of a chaste kiss (during a dancing lesson) on page 161,

followed by a slightly more ardent one on page 204. The social customs of Stolz's 1951 suburban world, in which the protagonist's apron-clad mother greets her after school with a silver pitcher of iced tea, then washes and buffs the pitcher and carefully stores it in a blue flannel bag, seem alien forty-odd years later. Indeed, some well-known young adult books of the late 1960s and the 1970s suffer from just the same kind of obsolescence: though frequently taught in young adult literature courses as "relevant," the older titles of Paul Zindel and some other groundbreakers seem like historical novels to many teenagers today. ("They talk like my mom," one student said revealingly of *My Darling, My Hamburger* [1969]; "she says stuff like 'groovy.'") Language, particularly dialogue, can date a young adult book faster than anything else. So, ironically, the more accurate the portrayal of adolescent speech patterns, the shorter will be the life span of that particular book's "relevance" to the present experience of teenaged readers.

Similarly, the evolution of taste in clothing, amusements, drugs, and so on will have more direct impact on young adult social realism than on children's. Clothing *matters* to teens as an outward symbol of their search for identity, and so clothes usually figure in young adult fiction to a greater extent than in children's books. Alas, characters in bell-bottoms may not appeal to the 1990s reader. Books in which a once-trendy drug appears may seem irrelevant to those using its "designer" equivalent ten or fifteen years later. Legal developments can affect teens more directly than their younger siblings; the legalization of abortion and the rise in the legal drinking age have made many young adult novels outdated. Because young adult literature is marketed as, essentially, a disposable record of a fleeting moment, the theory that accompanies it is more likely to focus on social issues than on literary theory. Critics, understandably, find it more feasible to study the phenomena than to analyze the books themselves, which are often read simply as documents of an ever-changing adolescent social scene.

Finally, the threat of censorship to young adult books has diverted the attention of many writers who might otherwise theorize the field. It is difficult for scholars in children's literature to understand why their colleagues in the young adult area focus on censorship so much. It is, after all, possible to design an entire children's-literature course, or write a book about children's literature, or edit an issue of a children's-literature journal, without mentioning censorship. This is simply not the case in the young adult book world. Every textbook in the young adult field has an extensive section on censorship; journals and newsletters in the field constantly report censorship updates; and many scholars of young adult literature spend time in court as expert witnesses, or prepare material to assist others in doing so. The Winter 1993 issue of *The ALAN Review* was devoted to articles on censorship, as was the Fall 1994 issue of *SIGNAL*. A steady stream of articles related to censorship continues to appear in *English Journal* and in other journals with a focus on young adult books.

Why should this be so, particularly when YA books are themselves, like children's books, censored by publishers, authors, and societal expectations? Many books that speak directly to the adolescent experience use language that some adults do not like, mention experiences (especially sexual experiences) that make some adults uncomfortable, and examine the possibility, at least, of serious challenges to authority. These characteristics are not *necessarily* found in the majority of books for younger children (even though these works may in fact be just as "subversive"). The children's books do not always involve *obvious* taboos, but the YA ones generally do. Nor are these taboos limited to "New Realism" titles: increasingly, parents object to fantasies as well. Most scholars in the young adult field like the books they teach and are willing to spend time and effort defending them. In these circumstances, it is not entirely surprising that the same scholars do not tend to concern themselves with theoretical approaches to the books whose very right to existence they are defending. To a general public that objects to the number of times body parts are mentioned in *The Chocolate War* (an actual instance), it is fruitless to offer a defense based on the ideas of Michel Foucault—interesting though this might be as a response. In other words, approaches to young adult books are, for many scholars, conditioned more by "outside" (non-academic) conditions than is the case in other areas of children's literature. A picture-book scholar may or may not be an apologist for the nude Mickey of *In the Night Kitchen*; just about every teacher of young adult literature is an apologist for the material.

Marketing and censorship, two external pressures on young adult literature, help to explain the lack of theory but do not entirely excuse it. The failure of young adult literature specialists to confront the canon is equally significant; after all, the existence of a canon gives students and critics something to focus on, and the more that is written on a relatively small number of books, the more likely it is that some theoretical criticism will emerge. In 1942 and 1967, the two frequently proposed birthdates for adolescent literature, no one talked much about a canon. As recently as 1976, when I entered the field, the study of adolescent literature did not center on a canon; in fact, it might not even focus on adolescent literature. Instead, a course might deal primarily with methodology, or review classic works that had adolescent characters or were traditionally taught in high schools (*A Separate Peace* would fit both of these categories), and might sometimes—briefly—introduce what was called the "junior novel." The only widely available textbook, Stephen Dunning and Alan B. Howes's *Literature for Adolescents*, was significantly subtitled *Teaching Poems, Stories, Novels and Plays*; it contained one chapter (out of twenty) on the "junior book." Not that Dunning and Howes were ignorant of the field: Dunning had done a pioneering dissertation on junior novels as early as 1959, had edited a highly successful collection of poetry for adolescents,

removed entirely from the Honor Sampling: Richard Peck's *Princess Ashley* (formerly included for 1987), Whitley Strieber's *Wolf of Shadows* (1985), Janine Boissard's *A Matter of Feeling* (1980), Vera and Bill Cleaver's *Trial Valley* and Don Brede's *Hard Feelings* (1977), Jessamyn West's *Massacre at Fall Creek* (1975), and Erich Segal's *Love Story* (1970) are among the Third Edition honor books omitted from the Fourth Edition. Donaldson and Nilsen say simply, "We've used our own judgment about deleting a few of the older books" (9). Without comment, the authors have also augmented the Honor Sampling for some of the early years. In retrospect, books may merit inclusion in the Honor Sampling that did not seem to meet the criteria earlier, and these titles have now been silently added: Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (for 1967); Barbara Wertsba's *Run Softly, Go Fast* (1970); S. E. Hinton's *That Was Then, This Is Now* (1971); Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* and Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* (1973); Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* (1975); and Cormier's *I Am the Cheese*, M. E. Kerr's *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*, and Robin Brancato's *Winning* (1977) did not appear in the original (1980) edition but are included in the Fourth Edition (1993).

Then there are the anarchists, such as myself, who question the validity of any YA canon. My student who identified the Zindel characters with her mother's generation illustrates this futility perfectly. Can we speak of any kind of permanent canon in a field where the "real" readers, the young adults themselves, value "now" to the virtual exclusion of whatever is not "now"? Here is where we have largely failed, until recently, to initiate a necessary clement in our critical dialogue. Children's literature critics generally agree upon the desirability of a canon, their disagreements are more in the details. YA critics, though, have barely begun to discuss the existence of a canon, or what standards should be applied, or whether it is possible for books to remain canonical after their readership has completely deserted them. Without any agreement about the nature (much less the content) of a YA canon, further theoretical discussion has, understandably, lagged.

The current debate about the canon seems to be taking two rather different tracks. Those who are interested both in children's literature and in the YA area have conducted a lively debate about the existence of a YA canon on the electronic discussion group CHILDLIT (reconstituted, during the middle of the canon discussion, as CHILD\_LIT). Meanwhile, the YA "specialists," that is, those who do not work much or at all in the area of children's literature, have begun to appropriate the term "canon" to apply to what they have been talking about all along—the inclusion of "popular" (i.e., specifically YA-oriented) books in recommended reading lists and school curricula. Robert Carliscen has been active in this debate for decades; recent expositions have been seen at regular intervals in *English Journal* and other classroom-oriented publications. A clear statement of this position occurs in Chris Crowe's

from other countries than there used to be. Indeed, today there are more adolescent books available to us, too, would now include more books from other lands, and included, without comment, on the Honor Sampling. Most of us, now a book such as Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree* is hands of the argument that YA books as such were unnecessary. Now a book such as Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree* is still defensive about YA books; it then seemed to play into the hands of the argument that YA books as such were unnecessary. This inclusion was harder to justify when we were include in our canon some books not originally written for tend to have "multicultural" values. Most of us would now mixture. Even more than books for younger readers, YA books "classic" status; another, social implications; still others, a tion, or book award list may stress readability; another, many. One college YA syllabus, or high school library collec-

and remained active and influential. Rather, the educational system was, simply, geared to much older works. Apologists for "adolescent" literature usually felt themselves to be on the defensive—even in 1975, the date of the Dunning and Howes textbook. The canon, at that point, was widely seen to consist of "classics"; apologists for young adult books avoided the idea of a canon altogether, or were vaguely anti-canon, or, occasionally, suggested that the canon might be broadened to include a few young adult titles.

In its short official lifetime, YA literature has gone from having no acknowledged existence, to forming a generally recognized category with a central canon, to displaying a more fragmented, ever-changing multiplicity of canons. There are people who believe in a permanent "best" list (beginning with either *Huckleberry Finn* or *A Separate Peace* and ending somewhere around *The Pigman* or *A Day No Pigs Would Die*). There are moderates who believe in a canon that occasionally requires adjustments and combines the function of a "best" list with a record of changing tastes—for instance, Donaldson and Nilsen's Honor Sampling. The books recognized for excellence in the 1990s are quite different from those of the early years. In some cases, books have been de-canonized and

### "Aiming the New Canon: Developing a Reader Friendly Curriculum":

This new canon will be considerably more open, freed of its predecessor's established and moldy classics that taught students that reading is not only difficult, but something one does only under duress. It will be cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic. Instead of representing only the traditional aristocratic works, it will include a broad variety of literature, making it infinitely more accessible and approachable to students. (11)

In other words, one group of scholars (chiefly YA specialists concerned with high school curricula) is working on the inclusion of YA books in an existing canon of "classics," while another (people who teach in colleges, especially outside of the secondary-education area) is considering the existence of a canon composed entirely of YA books. Within the second group, some are interested in a permanent canon, while others envision one that is constantly changing.

Course development has proceeded in tandem with changes in the canon: from no courses, to fairly standardized ones, to a wide variety. In the 1970s another coming of age took place when many states began to require that education students take a course in YA literature in order to be certified for secondary school teaching. It was common for this course to be assigned to a junior member of staff—not because it was less desirable but because often no one on staff knew much about the subject. So, like many others, I said goodbye to the familiar authors of my own field, the seventeenth century, and moved hesitantly into the far stranger world of the Socs and Greasers, of Edna Shinglebox and Marsh Mellow, of Jerry Renault and Brother Leon and the rest. Colleagues and students participated in impromptu discussions: could a couple really conceive a baby underwater, as appears to happen in *He's My Baby, Now?* (We decided that Charles and Daisy must have climbed onto a convenient raft between sentences.) In *The Contender*, is it plausible for Alfred's employer, Mr. Epstein, to have boxed as "Lightning Lou"? (For the time period, yes.) Would a boy carry a raincoat to school to conceal possible erections as Tony does in *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*? (Opinions were divided.) One colleague in another department was willing to borrow books and comment on them—as long as I put them in his mailbox in a plain envelope. Thus the early teachers of YA literature in colleges, the people from whom one might expect the majority of YA criticism to emerge, spent much of their time learning the field as they went along and introducing and justifying it to other professionals. People who do not yet have a firm grip on their material, and who feel that other academics do not understand or value it, are unlikely to produce theoretically oriented criticism.

Those days are gone. Today we see a group of trained people—the older ones trained in the trenches but, at any rate,

trained by now, the young ones trained in varied and challenging programs, either in English departments or in schools of education or library science. Some courses focus on classroom applications of YA literature, others on the criticism of this body of work as if it were, say, metaphysical poetry, others (including mine) on a variety of topics. Beginning in the mid-1980s there has been a choice of several textbooks, from the relatively literary Donelson and Nilsen to Arthea (Charlie) Reed's aptly named *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School* (1985) to Jean E. Brown and Elaine C. Stephens's recent offering, also classroom-oriented, *Teaching Young Adult Literature: Sharing the Connection* (1995). Today's students come from a variety of disciplines, not just secondary education; few expect an easy grade. Today's teachers of YA courses have learned their field, have justified their existence, and can now go on toward theory if they wish.

The persistent connection between YA literature courses and high school certification, however, continues to exert a strong influence toward "applied" criticism, particularly with reference to the use of YA books in the high school classroom. Since the main rationale for the existence of YA courses (in terms of enrollment) usually rests upon secondary certification requirements, the mindset of a YA class—even if the instructor, like me, does not cover classroom applications—remains resolutely pragmatic. English department instructors of YA literature, too, tend to think that most theory, with the possible exception of psychological theory, is less relevant here than it is in other upper-level courses. In most cases, the mindset of the class affects the instructor outside the class also, and his or her criticism is thus influenced toward praxis, away from theory. In this regard, YA instructors are probably in the position of children's-literature instructors ten to twenty years ago.

The YA journals, however, have not remained unchanged in the last twenty years. In the mid- to late 1970s, a small band of dedicated scholars promoted adolescent literature in a few journals. Donelson's support for YA books in the *Arizona English Bulletin* included two special issues, one in 1972 and one in 1976, as well as numerous individual articles. Like the Arizona journal, a special issue of the *Texas Tech Journal of Education* in 1980 featured some of the most influential names in the field: Mike Angelotti, Dwight Burton, Theodore Hipple, Don Gallo, and others.

The two most important journals came from NCTE: the venerable *English Journal* and *The ALAN Review*. The founding of the latter marked still another coming of age for adolescent literature. In the journal's early days, many articles were either much-needed reviews, classroom applications, or aggressive advocacy, sometimes mixed with cries of agony. In the Fall 1979 issue of *The ALAN Review*, a fledgling journal that had not yet developed a cover and that at that time abbreviated itself inelegantly as *TAR*, two of the three lead articles are Angelotti's "Will There Be an Adolescent Literature in the 21st Century?" and Ellen Lewis's "Teachers in



Adolescent Literature: Are We the Good Guys?"—both, in different ways, advocacy/agency pieces. (Angelotti's essay was perceived as being so well in tune with the editorial focus of the issue that the journal ran it as a guest editorial.) With the next issue came a geometrically patterned cover and a better pagination system; in the 1980s, most issues had fifty or more pages and featured substantive articles on a variety of topics. On entering the 1990s, the publication adopted a snappy new cover, an attractively redesigned format, and, at last, MLA-style documentation. Articles include both classroom-oriented and "scholarly" (including historical) topics. The journal also continues its advocacy of YA literature and its excellent clip-and-file reviews.

From the International Reading Association comes *SLG-NAL*, the journal of the IRA's Special Interest Group on Literature for the Adolescent Reader. A recent (1995) issue on nonfiction illustrates the journal's emphasis on usable information about the real-world reading tastes of young adults. Pamela Sissi Carroll's "Acne and Tattoos, Skateboards and Hip-Hop: The Magazines That Adolescents Read for Information" should be required reading for all who have difficulty seeing beyond a narrow canon of YA "classics." (Articles in the "applied" journals serve, too, as useful reminders of how much of what YA's read is not fiction, or at least not book-length fiction. My exclusion of nonfiction from the discussion of theory does not mean that it is unimportant.) In the two cited NCTE journals, as well as in *SIGNAL*, critical articles normally stop short of the theoretical. Since the readership of these journals consists largely of high school teachers and those who train them, the emphasis on comprehensibility and practicality is logical.

While *English Journal* went its steady way and *The ALAN Review* grew under a series of exceptionally able editors, some important "mainstream" journals also gave more space to YA materials. The British-American journal *Children's Literature in Education* published a number of distinguished articles on YA authors, from the famous (Alan Garner) to the cultish (Richard Allen). *Horn Book* did the same, showcasing YA writer Bruce Brooks as early as 1987. The *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, which once maintained a separate YA column, began printing articles on YA literature and themes alongside its other articles. *The Lion and the Unicorn* saw an increase in articles on YA literature; the issue for June 1988, for instance, entitled "The Dark Side of Nature in Children's Books," deals extensively with YA titles. Also in 1988, the prestigious annual *Children's Literature* carried an article by Frank Myszor analyzing Cormier's *After the First Death* in terms of French structuralist concepts. Perhaps the mixed readership of these journals affords more encouragement for theoretical approaches than do the classroom-oriented publications.

Today, then, scholars in the YA field are very like scholars in any other literary field. We have, it seems, successfully infiltrated. The first "normal" conference at which I delivered a YA paper (1980) was a comparative literature gathering, and my audience reacted as if hearing for the first time of books for

and about a species from another galaxy. Today, that audience would probably have heard of, or even read, the texts under discussion. One result of this change is that papers and articles on YA literature must now be just as scholarly as any others; with novelty gone, quality becomes important. My 1980 paper probably would not be accepted today.

However, in terms of theory, YA scholarship lags behind its children's-literature counterpart. Partly, as I have suggested, this results from the perceived need for YA professionals to act as boosters, introducers, and defenders of a strange but valuable new product. Boosters, though often necessary, does not produce much theorizing. Meanwhile, those who do deal in theory are perhaps discouraged from the use of YA texts by a lingering myth that such texts are beneath notice. Michael Cart quotes Aidan Chambers on the "lack of critical apparatus" in the YA field, stemming in his view from the "endless disparagement of the form by people who, for whatever reasons, dismiss teenage books as beyond serious interest—a bastard and unwanted hybrid" (qtd. 154-55).<sup>4</sup> A related problem is that many YA scholars operate from a popular-culture approach, drawing conclusions from some-times large numbers of rather ordinary (even "subliterary") books. Though valid, this approach does not lend itself to theorizing, at least not beyond historical-cultural contextualization. And, as I have also suggested, the emphasis on classroom applications found in some journals that welcome YA articles, while not precluding excellent scholarship, does not foster *theoretical* scholarship.

The growth of criticism has also been hampered by lack of communication among different segments of the YA critical community. The main groups are college professors in English departments, college professors in education departments, high school and middle school teachers, high school and middle school librarians, public library YA staff, and professors in MLS programs. Too often, even within a single discipline, those "in the field" (teachers and practicing librarians) may not communicate with those in academia. Though the same situation prevails in the children's section, I believe that it has more serious implications for YA practitioners. To begin with, the often-controversial nature of the books used by YA professionals makes lack of cooperation costly. We simply do not have time to waste gathering, in defense of challenged books, materials that someone else has already assembled. Second, the absence of an agreed-upon canon, the relatively small number of frequently discussed books, and the popularity-culture tendencies of the YA field make a wide acquaintance with large numbers of YA texts essential. Experience suggests that this wide knowledge is often more common among librarians than among academics. Anyone who has ever served on a book award committee can attest to this. Although librarians may not always choose to become involved in theory, they have a broad grasp of the texts that we would do well to include in our academic discussions.<sup>5</sup>

Further, different professions publish in different journals, so this fragmentation may not be rectified in print. Academics usually read (and publish in) *The ALAN Review*, *Children's Literature*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, and *Children's Literature in Education*, or perhaps in *English Journal* or *Journal of Children's Literature* if their interests include classroom application. Except for *VOYA* (Voice of Youth Advocates) and *Horn Book*, however, most reviewing sources and marketplace publications go unread by academics—who are thus deprived of useful information from the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the late lamented *Wilson Library Bulletin*. Similarly, the reading-oriented *SIGNAL*, *Bookbird*, and *Five Owls* have helpful articles often unknown to academics outside of library schools.

Not only the reviewing media, but the professional library journals, as well, contain wonderful materials that academics need to know about. For instance, in June 1994, Cart delivered a speech at the YALSA preconference in Miami. (YALSA, short for Young Adult Library Services Association, is a subgroup of the American Library Association.) Cart's speech, "Of Risk and Revolution: The Current State of Young Adult Literature," was published in the Winter 1995 issue of the *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, an ALA journal sponsored jointly by YALSA and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). In it he assesses the field's publishing status, critical conditions, and relation to its young readership. Ranging over some fifty sources, from Italo Calvino to a singing group called the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, the piece is the most significant overview I have seen in several years. Sadly, however, few academics read *JOYS*; and, since it is indexed in *Library Literature*, *Library and Information Science Abstracts*, and *Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE)*, many MLA-oriented academics will not learn about the article through their normal search techniques either.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, that many of the library journals use either the thirteenth or the fourteenth edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* for documentation may deter MLA-trained scholars from contributing to them, as it is time-consuming to change from one system to another.

Why does any of this matter? As I have argued, knowledge of numerous texts is especially important to YA scholars and librarians, and their journals can help to provide that knowledge. (And possibly, as a member of YALSA and ALSC and a referee for *JOYS*, I am biased.) Further, I suggest, theoretical criticism does not come out of nowhere. A good grasp of what is going on generally in a field makes the leap to theory possible. A wider angle of information is needed than that which most academic practitioners now enjoy.

Young adult practitioners in the United States have also been handicapped by a sort of myopic nationalism. Though several journals have steadfastly combatted this tendency by publishing quality surveys of YA books from other countries—

nearly every issue of *The ALAN Review* in 1979-80 contains one such article—there is a widespread assumption that YA literature is, somehow, peculiarly "American" (meaning from the United States, as some YA critics seem oddly unaware of the existence of Canada, not to mention Mexico and South America). Books from Britain are underrepresented, and the fact that Chambers, John Rowe Townsend, Josephine Kamm, and others were active in this field very early is not widely known.<sup>7</sup> Peter Hollindale, one of the pioneering academics who fought to make the study of children's and young adult literature acceptable in Britain, recently provided an overview of what he calls the "adolescent novel of ideas," a thoughtful account that balances texts from both sides of the Atlantic, highlighting those by LeGuin and Peter Dickinson. How many YA critics in the U.S. would take a similarly balanced view? How many would have heard of one of Hollindale's examples, Kamm's *Young Mother*, which predates *The Outsiders* by two years?

I suspect that a high percentage of YA scholars received their training in American literature—or in "English Education," which is also strong in U.S. texts. Many children's-literature scholars whom I know, by contrast, come from backgrounds in British or comparative literature, especially in the Renaissance and Victorian periods. The geographic clustering of YA scholars in the U.S. and the narrowly American basis that often marks their training, factors that can sometimes make YA professionals seem more provincial than their children's-literature counterparts, is beginning to close, thanks to the Internet. Discussion groups to which I belong include contributors from Australia and Finland, as well as the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. This diversity will, surely, help to broaden the outlook of scholar and student alike. Until more people have access to online groups, though, some provincialism will persist.

Will the theoretical criticism of YA literature ever reach the standard already seen in children's-literature criticism? Perhaps not. It seems unlikely that this turbulent field will ever produce such criticism in quantity; its roots were formed in other soil. Individual exceptions, such as the Myszor article, will continue to appear. They will probably cluster around a few YA authors: Cormier, Garner, and so on. Excellent articles using the traditions of historical criticism, of popular culture, and of reader-response theory will also continue to appear—many of them very scholarly indeed, though not "theoretical" in the manner of Myszor. Theorists who cover the wider field of children's literature may well begin to consider the separate problems of YA books and address these directly; the increasingly sophisticated examination of picture books provides a recent analogy.

Reference books pertaining specifically to YA books and authors have already caught up to the high standard of their counterparts in children's literature, as signified by recent fine offerings from Beacham, Salem, and St. James. The fact that

a standard reference book, *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, has now become two separate volumes—one for children's writers properly so called and the other for young adult writers—suggests the trend. Similarly, the long-lived *Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*, by Rebecca Lukens, now has a companion volume by Lukens and Ruth K. Cline, *A Critical Handbook of Young Adult Literature*. Cormier's introduction to the new *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers* expresses admirably the state of affairs in the 1990s: even though "YA literature continues to be neglected or misunderstood," he observes, still "the gains made in the field are truly astonishing, considering that . . . the first major work to be labeled YA, [*The Outsiders*], was published . . . less than thirty years ago" (ix). Cormier is right, I think. The gains are astonishing—not only in the quality and quantity of young adult books, but in the development of criticism as well. All in all, YA scholarship is healthy even if not, or not yet, particularly "theoretical."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A very different textbook, David Russell's *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction* (1991) follows the same grouping as Nodelman's: many young adult titles included with those for younger children, concentrated heavily in the chapter called "Realistic Fiction."

<sup>2</sup>Richard Ammon's "Last Rites for the Young Adult Novel" connects the marketplace, the writing community, and the critical situation in a brief overview; most critics of young adult literature fail to make these connections unless they are talking about horror or romance series.

<sup>3</sup>The Honor Sampling is compiled by a composite method: sources such as *Booklist*, *New York Times*, *Horn Book*, and the various ALA lists are compared, and titles that appear in at least three of these lists are ranked.

<sup>4</sup>The original Chambers piece, "Alive and Flourishing," which appeared in *Booktalk* (Harper, 1985), is well worth reading in its entirety; several other articles in *Booktalk* also pertain directly to the young adult field, including some consideration of the differences between British and U.S. books for this age group.

<sup>5</sup>On a more optimistic note, intercommunication has begun to improve with the spread of electronic discussion groups. It is now common for professionals from different backgrounds to participate in several groups and to cross-post to several groups at once—for instance, to CHILD-LIT, KIDLIT, and PUBYAC. Most of the groups have participants in several countries, and the International Research Society for Children's Literature has recently begun a group (for members only). *The ALAN Review* and *JOTS* have home pages on the World Wide Web, and no doubt others will follow.

<sup>6</sup>Editors' note: *Children's Literature Abstracts* lists *JOTS* and the other YA journals mentioned in this article, as does the *Quarterly Bibliography*, though fewer citations can be included.

<sup>7</sup>Readers who feel that they, of course, were well aware of this should ask themselves whether they noticed the omission of the groundbreaking British journal *Signal*, not to be confused with the unrelated U.S. publication *SIGNAL*, from my account of journal developments. Though *Signal* probably carried more articles of genuine interest to YA enthusiasts than any parallel publication of the 1970s, it is seldom mentioned in U.S. textbooks or referenced by U.S. scholars.

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